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ABSTRACT

This Digest summarizes trends in grading practices and introduces issues related to standards-based reporting. A large majority of schools use a traditional grading system, and many teachers have a great deal of autonomy in making decisions about grades. Given the latitude that teachers have in developing grading policies and differences in curriculum across schools, districts, and states, it is not surprising that there may be disconnects between students' grades and student achievement as measured by test performance. One possible way to find out if an "A" at one school represents the same level of achievement as an A at another school is to compare student performance on end-of-course examinations. Fifteen states now use end-of-course examinations. Most states have embraced standards-based education, and it might be possible to make grades reflect the progress students have made toward the standards. Report cards that combine traditional grades and information about progress toward standards are also an option. K. Marzano describes such an approach and also recommends that teachers reorganize their grade books around standards by allocating columns to standards rather than to assignments and tests. Some current classroom grading practices are thought to be detrimental to the goals of standards-based education. It is essential that clear information be provides about how far along each child is in mastering specific knowledge and skills that all are expected to learn. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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High School Report Cards

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One of the things that hasn't changed much about schooling over the years is the ritual of assigning grades to student report cards. Grades serve many functions: they are a way to communicate with students and their parents about achievement and effort; they are sometimes used to select and sort students for various programs; and they can serve as an incentive for students to learn and behave in certain ways. High school grades are of particular interest to many parents and students because they are an important factor in college admission decisions. This Digest summarizes trends in grading practices and introduces issues related to standards-based reporting.

How Are Grades Assigned?

According to a 1997 College Board survey of 3,000 high schools, a large majority of schools use a traditional grading system involving A-F or numeric grades (91 percent), report grade point averages (90.1 percent), and calculate high school class rank (81.3 percent). Further, many teachers have a great deal of autonomy in making decisions about grades. Nearly 85 percent of high schools surveyed reported that teachers "may award any distribution of grades they desire depending on student performance (e.g., mostly A or mostly C)." A much smaller percentage required teachers to follow general guidelines (6.6 percent) or strict guidelines (3.5 percent) regarding grade distribution.

While measurement experts urge that grades be focused on current levels of achievement, teachers typically consider a variety of other factors when assigning grades, including effort, progress, participation, behavior, and attitude. Teachers and students alike tend to find these grading practices reasonable (Brookhart, 1994; Cross and Frary, 1999). By the high school years, teachers, parents, and students tend to agree that communicating with parents is a less important purpose of grading, and providing students with feedback is a more important purpose. Parents appear less clear than their high school children about what grading elements are important. In one survey, they rated major exams and compositions, class attendance, punctuality of assignments, class behavior, and progress as more important in determining grades than the teachers and students did (Guskey, 2002).

Can Grades Be Compared?

Given the considerable latitude that teachers have in developing grading policies and differences in curriculum across schools, districts, and states, it is not surprising that there may be disconnects between students' grades and student achievement as measured by test performance. For example, the U.S. Department of Education did a study that examined students' reports of their grades in English and mathematics and their scores on two short tests given as part of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988. Students in high-poverty schools (schools where more than 75 percent of students received free or reduced-price lunches) who received mostly A's in English got about the same reading scores as the "C" and "D" students in the most affluent schools. The students who received A's in math in the high-poverty schools scored about the same on the math test as the "D" students in the most affluent schools did. (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Significant grading variations among schools were also noted in a more recent study drawing on the National Education Longitudinal Study database (Willingham, Pollack, and Lewis, 2002).

How can we find out if an A earned in a subject in one school represents the same level of achievement as an A earned in that subject in another school? One way is to compare student performance on end-of-course examinations. End-of-course exams are developed by school districts or states and administered to all students when they complete a course such as algebra or biology. Examining how students' test results compare to the course grades they've earned can be a good check on the rigor of an academic program. Fifteen states now include, or will soon add, end-of-course exams as part of their high school assessment systems (Somerville, Levitt, and Yi, 2002).

Standards-Based Grading Practices

Most states have embraced standards-based education, a process that requires them to identify what specific knowledge and skills students are expected to master at each grade level and then align curriculum, teaching, and testing with those standards. Some schools are now experimenting with changes in their report cards to better reflect student progress toward achieving the standards.

Rather than the familiar A through F in each subject, standards-based report cards might feature numbers or phrases that represent whether students have reached, exceeded, or not yet met various specific performance expectations. As an example, a third-grade mathematics grade might include a number or phrase that would denote whether students exceed, meet, approach, or begin to achieve standards in comparing, adding, and subtracting fractions and identifying place values. Such a report card actually provides more detailed, specific information than a traditional grade, though parents and students may find the change disconcerting, and concerns have been expressed about how colleges might evaluate report cards that don't show traditional grade point averages (Manzo, 2001).

Report cards that combine traditional grades and information about progress toward standards are also an option. Wiggins (1994) advocates a performance-based report card that plots overall student achievement against norms and standards, identifies strengths and weaknesses in specific areas, and also includes teacher judgments about students' academic progress, growth, intellectual character, and work habits. Marzano (1998) shows an example report card that includes a transcript indicating how many times each standard has been assessed, the average score obtained, as well as the highest, lowest, and most recent scores.

Marzano further recommends that teachers reorganize their grade books around standards by allocating columns to standards rather than to assignments and tests. Such a change can prompt major changes in teacher thinking: "Teachers who have adopted this approach report that it moves them to plan their assessments early and in detail, rather than simply assigning chapter questions at the end of a reading passage or constructing a quiz consisting entirely of forced-choice items. Instead, the teacher must constantly ask which standards [s]he means to address, what assessment data [s]he will gather, and how [s]he will gather it" (p. 60).

Some classroom grading practices are thought to be detrimental to the goals of standards-based education-namely, that clear information should be provided about how far along each child is in mastering specific knowledge and skills that all are expected to learn. These practices include grading on a curve and using low grades, including zeros, as a form of punishment for students capable of doing better work (Guskey, 2000). Deciding grade distributions after seeing how students do relative to each other tends to put more emphasis on competition than on learning. Giving low grades for poor work or zeros for missing work to students who have the capacity to complete the assignments may let students off the hook for not learning. An alternative approach would be to require students to resubmit work until it meets standards, with remediation provided as necessary, perhaps through after-school or Saturday learning sessions. In all cases, it is important that teachers provide a written grading policy that explains what contributes to grades, and how much each factor is weighted.

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